

RECENSIONI

Rebecca HASSELBACH, *Case in Semitic. Roles, Relations, and Reconstruction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, 384 p., ISBN 978-0-19-967180-9

This book develops a new explanation of the system of Semitic case-endings, based on recent advances in typological studies, among which the notion of marked-NOM(inative) L(anguage). This is a subtype of NOM/ACC(usative) L with the ACC - instead of the NOM - serving as the default case, i.e., the case used in the widest range of functions (pp. 322-332). In the author's view, the empirical basis for a reconstruction of the declensional morphology of P(roto) S(emitic) along these lines is the diptotic declension, as observed in Classical Arabic and, according to some scholars, in Ugaritic, the ability of the diptotic ending -a to signal both an object- and a genitival relation (e.g. *riṭlun zaytan* 'one riṭl of oil') being a clear example of the unmarked status of the ACC. However, as Hasselbach admits (pp. 52, 282, 330), reconstructing an unmarked ACC phonologically realized as -a for PS conflicts with the pre-theoretical fact that the early documented Semitic Ls rather attest to an undeclinable ending -a (cp. Akkadian DINGIR-ba-na 'god is beautiful': p. 40). The solution Hasselbach offers to this problem largely depends on a biologically-oriented definition of PS, which heavily draws, in turn, on typological studies. In this interpretive scenario, PS was a L characterized by 'punctuation', i.e., by relative dishomogeneity, not unlike Proto Indo-European, which Indo-Europeanists currently regard as a range of dialects rather than as a single entity (pp. 3-6). Insofar as its nominal morphology is concerned, the PS thus characterized underwent a transition from caseless L, whose "nouns would have ended in -a without -a being a case marker" (p. 330), to a marked-NOM L (cp. the diptotic -a), bearing the 'dishomogeneous' marks of both these strata.

This proposal is at once appealing and incomplete. On the one hand, positing a caseless stage for PS is typologically consistent with another important idea advanced by Hasselbach (pp. 256-257), on the basis of the occurrence, in the PS daughters, of the VSO-order and of a relative clause type headed by an article-less noun: namely, that PS was a head-marking L. To put it simply, such a property, which in effect seems predominant in the attested caseless daughters of PS, manifests itself when a given grammatical relation is assigned a phonological exponent on the head (cp. Moroccan Arabic *nbār lli kəbrat*, lit. 'day which grew.up.she', i.e., 'when she grew up', with the relative clause *lli*, etc., signaled by the phonological device of article-deletion, which marks the head *nbār*), rather than on the dependent (cp. English the man's house, whose genitive exponent 's marks the dependent the man). On the other hand, the assumption that the above caseless stage drifts into (and partly co-exists with) a NOM-marked stage leaves some diachronic and typological aspects unaccounted for.

Firstly, the exact nature of the undeclinable -a prior to its evolution into a diptotic -a is not clear, nor is it clear how and why this ending was superseded by the triptotic -i, as the author herself recognizes (p. 325). Secondly, the distribution of pausal forms in Classical Arabic hardly fits in with the reconstructed NOM-marked status of PS, given the marked status of ACC in the pausal context. Thirdly, the Colloquial Arabic varieties appear underrepresented in the typological taxonomy that defines PS as a head-marking L, despite the declared importance of Semitic caseless languages and/or Arabic Colloquial varieties in this kind of reconstruction (p. 243). For instance, in dealing with the head-marking strategy that uses article-deletion as a phonological exponent located on the nominal head, in order to signal the presence of a relative clause (see above), Hasselbach states (p. 253) that it occurs in Akkadian, Old South Arabian, and Hebrew, without taking into account its Colloquial Arabic manifestation, as is observed in the aforementioned Moroccan Arabic

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construction *nbār lli kəbrat*, as well as in Syrian Arabic etc.¹. Another telling example is the discussion of the head-marking strategy that combines a noun with the particle *la*, and ‘doubles’ it with a suffix-pronoun attached to a nominal head, so as to render the pronoun in question the phonological exponent of a genitive relation. While, in fact, this strategy is exemplified through Ge‘ez (*wald-u la-neguš*, lit. ‘son-his la-king’, i.e., ‘the king’s son’: p. 208), no mention is made of Colloquial Arabic examples, which instantiate the same pattern, such as Syrian Arabic *la-ṭōni mātit ‘imm-u*, lit. ‘la-Tony died-she mother-his’, i.e., ‘Tony’s mother died’².

The conceptual core of Hasselbach’s books, as summarized in the foregoing, presupposes a certain acquaintance with the interpretive tools of both Semitic linguistics and linguistic typology, so it is mainly intended for Semitists interested in typological studies, and for typologists who aim at including Semitic languages in their research. The author is aware of this, and organizes the book’s contents accordingly. Ch. 1 defines the notion of PS relative to both linguistic typology (cp. the above-mentioned ‘punctuation’), and Semitic linguistics (e.g. its place within the Afro-Asiatic family). Ch. 2 provides a concise yet accurate outline of Semitic languages, focusing on their nominal morphology and declensional systems. Ch. 3 introduces the main typological notions relevant to the reconstruction of the PS system of case-endings (or its lack thereof). In the remainder of the book, the discussion, which involves a fair amount of technicalities, deals with the hypothesis, and related evidence, that PS is a NOM/ACC- and head-marking L (Chs. 4, 5, respectively); it proceeds, then, to refine such a twofold typological interpretation of PS as follows: along its development, PS was a subtype of head-marking L, characterized by the absence of declension, and, subsequently, a subtype of NOM/ACC L known as marked-NOM L (Ch. 6, Conclusions).

FRANCESCO GRANDE
Università Ca’ Foscari, Venezia

1 Cp. Kristen E. Brustad. *The Syntax of Spoken Arabic*. Washington DC, 2000, p. 103.

2 *Ibidem*, p. 323.